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OPINION ESSAY

Abstract

This essay explores a central question for all those involved in education and sustainability (ESD): what are you really most interested in: educational or social outcomes – what learners learn, or what they do? Although this is hardly a new question, the paper argues that it is one that needs to be emphasised at this time when we see a tightening focus on modifying behaviours, and the conscription of educational institutions and programmes to these ends. The essay takes the promotion of Fairtrade, a contemporary view on how ESD might be conceptualised, and a recent report from the English schools inspectorate, to explore where an appropriate balance might be struck between these. The essay argues that, although both educational and social outcomes are important, when it comes to making judgements about school effectiveness, this needs to be tightly focused on what young people are learning rather than on, say, the amount of energy they have saved or waste they have recycled.

Judging the Effectiveness of a Sustainable School: A brief exploration of issues

WILLIAM SCOTT

A colleague and I recently spent an informative day in an English primary school that wins awards for its work on sustainability. We noticed two displays which revealed a jarring juxtaposition of values. The first was an exemplary exhibition about wind farms, which dealt in both scientific and social terms with the benefits and problems of harnessing wind energy. This was presented as a controversial issue and we were left with the impression that young people would likely come away with nuanced age-appropriate understandings. The second display, just down the corridor, was a poster that simply said: "Buy Fair Trade" – an unambiguous moral instruction.

In talking with teachers and students from the school's Eco-club, we mentioned the contrast between the presentations of wind energy as something to be critically examined, and fair trade as something to be uncritically promoted, and asked why this was, given that both were perceived in the wider world as contentious – albeit for very different reasons. The teachers'

response was that they didn't really see fair trade as controversial. But, of course, it is, given that it promotes both a particular set of values, along with a way of realising them.¹

OUTCOMES OF ESD: EDUCATIONAL OR SOCIAL?

This contrast is revealing in that it exposes a central question for those involved in education and sustainability (ESD): Are you really interested in educational outcomes or in social outcomes? In what learners learn, or what they do? As readers will appreciate, this is not a new question. It is, however, one that needs to be asked continually, especially at a time of heavy focus on sustainable behaviours, and the conscription of educational institutions to these ends.

UNESCO², the task manager of the UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development, sees ESD as education that seeks to balance human and economic well-being with cultural traditions and respect for the earth's natural resources, through which transdisciplinary educational approaches develop an ethic for lifelong learning, foster respect for human needs that are compatible with sustainable use of natural resources and the needs of the planet, and nurture a sense of global solidarity. In other words, ESD engages (young) people in order to (1) stimulate their development of awareness, understanding and skills in relation to sustainability, and (2) give rise to social engagement and action in order to maximise both human well being and ecological integrity. Thus, in UNESCO's view, ESD is about both educational *and* social outcomes and thus a separation of the two would likely be seen as a false dichotomy. However, the important questions, perhaps, are: what is the relationship between these outcomes, and what is the appropriate balance to be struck between them in a formal educational setting?

SUSTAINABLE SCHOOLS FRAMEWORK

In England, the government's Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)³ is supporting the development of what it terms 'Sustainable Schools'⁴. Although there are obvious links to the Decade, and ESD more generally, they tend not to be spelled out. A key component of the DCSF approach is a focus on curriculum, community and campus which emphasises that, whilst what schools try to teach is important, how the institution as a whole is led, how its resources are managed, and how it contributes to the communities it serves, are

¹ For an exploration of controversial issues surrounding fair trade see Vare P & Scott W (2008) *Education for Sustainable Development: two sides and an edge*; London: DEA [<http://www.dea.org.uk/sub-554735>]






² http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=27602&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

³ www.dcsf.gov.uk

⁴ www.teachernet.gov.uk/sustainableschools

also key elements – as is how all these are pulled together so that students see, and are involved in addressing, the wider picture of sustainability. A positive feature of the Sustainable Schools framework is that it has been written in a way to help heads, teachers and governors understand recent policy focuses such as health, citizenship, social integration, energy, and transport ⁵. At heart, the DCSF Sustainable Schools framework sees the school both as a learning community in itself, and as an integral part of the wider socio-economic community, where this is locally-based, but with an increasingly global focus. ⁶ The DCSF hopes that schools will see their normal activities in this framework, and develop them in the context of an integrated curriculum / campus / community model along the lines described below.

1. Student learning that:

-  integrates academic, practical and ethical concerns
-  acknowledges the significance of the issues to all humanity, now and in the future
-  recognises different perspectives on problems and what might now be done
-  understands the complexities and uncertainties in data
-  appreciates the argument for involvement at a personal / social level

2. Greater awareness by governors, leaders, teachers and students of how the issues raised by the sustainable schools framework affect all aspects of school life, and how what the school does, as a community, might change and develop in particular ways, leading, for example, to a more integrated consideration of issues, cost savings, the creation of school buildings and grounds that can provide models of sustainability in practice, and hence act as positive teaching resources, and an enhanced involvement of students in decision making.

3. Increased local community involvement in all aspects of school life, the opening up of the school for community use, and its inspiration of the community to live more sustainably; but also the recognition that the idea of community is now appropriately seen at the global, as well as local, level, given our economic interdependence, our social linkages, and our shared environmental problems.

Being able to use the sustainable schools framework, with its familiar language, and to be able to say that schools are now addressing sustainability, has obvious attractions for

⁵ <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/aboutus/sd/doorways.shtml>

⁶ For a fuller critical overview of the English Sustainable Schools strategy, see Scott W (2008) *Raising standards: making sense of the sustainable schools agenda*; London: Specialist Schools and Academies Trust

government when it must report its progress on ESD to international agencies. However, there is a considerable difference between, on the one hand, addressing issues through the curriculum, linking this with purposeful activities in the school and community and achieving tangible pay-back through, for example, lower water and energy bills, and on the other hand to have all this develop student capability to respond to the challenges everyone will likely face in sustainable development which DCSF ⁷ has described like this:

Sustainable development means inspiring people in all parts of the world to find solutions that improve their quality of life without storing up problems for the future, or impacting unfairly on other people's lives. It must be much more than recycling bottles or giving money to charity. It is about thinking and working in a profoundly different way.




THE TWIN APPROACH TO ESD

This idea of thinking and working differently is crucial, and raises questions about what schools should do if they are to take sustainability seriously. This brings us to the idea of ESD as two interrelated and complementary approaches ⁸.

ESD 1 (learning for sustainable development) facilitates change in our ability to deal with the problems of the present, and how we live now, by promoting behaviour change, a shift in habit, or a switch in how things are thought about, where the need for this has been clearly identified and socially agreed.

ESD 2 (learning as sustainable development) facilitates change in our ability to deal with an uncertain and unknown future by building students' capacity to think critically about [and beyond] what is known now and what experts say, and to test out sustainable development ideas.

Schools can work on ESD 2 by recognising and acting on the many problems and ethical tensions that surround sustainable development such as:

-  Is sustainable development impossible because development (i.e. economic growth on the Western global-capitalist model) cannot be sustained?
-  Is trade a better poverty eradication strategy than aid?
-  Do personal freedoms need to be curtailed in order to limit destabilising changes; for example, to climate?

⁷ www.teachernet.gov.uk/sustainableschools

⁸ Vare P & Scott W (2007) Learning for a Change: exploring the relationship between education and sustainable

- ✚ Is climate change really human-induced?
- ✚ Is nuclear power now necessary if we are to reduce our carbon footprint?
- ✚ Should as much food and drink as possible be locally sourced; or should we continue to bring it from all over the world through trade with other countries?
- ✚ Should we promote fair trade or just trade?
- ✚ Should schools emphasize recycling and composting, or should they try not to create waste in the first place?
- ✚ Should national agriculture be subsidised in order to provide more food and bio fuels?
- ✚ Should all school kitchens use food grown on site?

And so on; the list is a long one, stretching from wind farms to fair trade – and beyond. Readers will all have their own context-appropriate examples. In this view, it is not just what you teach that matters. Rather, it is the tensions you acknowledge, and then face up to, when you do so. A school that doesn't engage students in addressing such issues is surely missing much of the point about the challenge and difficulty within the contemporary world, and losing valuable opportunities for learning.

THE PICTURE ON THE GROUND

But what is the picture on the ground? As yet, there is limited evidence but a 2008 report⁹ from the English school inspectorate (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills; Ofsted)¹⁰ raised pertinent points about the quality of teaching that they observed. The report noted that in the small number of schools that placed considerable emphasis on sustainable development: teaching was good, lessons were stimulating, and pupils were active in improving the sustainability of the school and wider community. However, in most schools, there was little emphasis on sustainable development and limited awareness of national and local government policies for this area. Where a sustainability focus was found, it was a peripheral issue, often confined to extra-curricular activities and involving only a minority of pupils, with little integration into the curriculum.

There were also some familiar-sounding caveats: (1) primary schools were more successful than secondary schools in promoting sustainability – particularly in terms of using their grounds as a resource for learning about it; and (2) schools were more successful in developing pupils' understanding of local rather than global issues.

development; *Journal of Education for Sustainable Development* 1:2 191–198

⁹ Inspectors visited a selection of primary and secondary schools to assess teaching about sustainability and progress towards meeting the expectations of the sustainable schools framework

The report's executive summary said:

In the best lessons, teachers used a range of imaginative activities so that pupils could work individually and in groups on identifying, discussing and solving practical problems and could develop and test out their views on complex ethical issues. The pupils responded well to such opportunities, drawing on the knowledge, understanding and skills acquired outside as well as within school. However, in many cases, the lack of a coordinated whole-school approach and insufficient opportunities for pupils to reinforce and develop what they had learned reduced the impact.

Ofsted's view is that how young people are engaged in dealing with the issues is important, and it applauds the positive involvement of pupils because that is what it thinks is pedagogically and educationally sound, and to be encouraged – and probably many reading this will agree.

THE SOCIAL PURPOSES OF EDUCATION

Of course, at heart, this cannot just be about deciding what to teach, and how. It is a curriculum question that is concerned with how we think about the social purposes of education. As curriculum is always a selection from culture, wise societies choose carefully and re-think their choices from time to time, especially when faced with social or economic challenges. The need for development that enhances sustainability is thought by many to be such a point of choice. Ofsted's way of thinking about sustainable schools represents an outward-looking, globally minded, and future-focused view that enables young people to engage in open-ended ways with the hugely significant debates that are happening in the wider world, the outcomes of which will affect their lives fundamentally. And this argues for students themselves to be both challenged, and heavily and genuinely engaged in decision-making processes – where school managers foster this through their leadership.

However, it is important to note that alongside the question that is inherent in the Decade: What can education (in this case schools) do for sustainable development? There is, as its corollary, a second, and just as important, question:¹¹ What can sustainable development do for schools? This reminds us that schools exist to educate young people, and are not primarily agencies to drive sustainable development or any other social process.

And it is this second question that is likely to appeal to schools, as it raises issues of success

¹⁰ www.ofsted.gov.uk

in relation to levels of achievement. This is a summary of what experienced English head teachers said at a recent seminar sustainable schools seminar funded by the UK's National College for School Leadership (NCSL) ¹²:

What really raises levels of achievement is students who are interested in what they are doing. Sustainability issues bring a distinctive dimension because students are focusing on significant issues in the wider world that are of increasing interest to families and get widely addressed in the media, and which communities care about. These are not just things that they are taught about in some abstract way – they are issues that matter – and matter in terms of how the school operates as a community. Students understand this, and know that when they participate, they are likely to have an audience that cares about what they do and say, which makes their involvement additionally meaningful and motivating.

This supports the idea that distinguishing between educational *and* social outcomes (learning v. doing) is a false dichotomy when it comes to seeing the purposes of ESD in the round. However, when it comes to making judgements about effectiveness, this needs, as Ofsted implies, to be focused on young people's learning rather than on, say, the amount of energy saved, waste recycled, or the number of trees planted and community meetings held. Whilst it is hard to think that there are many schools where students' learning is neglected in favour of promoting socio-environmental change, it all too easy to imagine individual lessons and teaching materials where this is the case. In a recent book, ¹³ Stanley Fish argues that, in the university classroom, the line of virtue is very clear. Fish asks: Are you asking academic questions, or are you trying to nudge your students in some ideological partisan direction? This seems a good question for schools as well, so – are we? This brings us full-circle back to questions about the promotion of fair trade (or any issue) – a promotion which would seem to have very little virtue at all

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¹¹ For a discussion of these questions in the context of higher education, see Gough S & Scott W (2007) *Higher Education and Sustainable development: paradox and possibility*: London: Routledge

¹² www.ncsl.org.uk

¹³ Fish, S (2008) *Save the World on your own Time*; New York: Oxford University Press